



# COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS QUARTERLY

A newsletter for, by and about Community Connections in Massachusetts

## Our Mission

The mission of Community Connections is to facilitate the organization of comprehensive family support systems in neighborhoods throughout the Commonwealth to prevent child abuse and neglect. Community Connections promotes a planning framework that is prevention-focused, is collaborative and builds upon the strengths and diversity within our neighborhoods.

Massachusetts  
Department of  
Social Services

LEWIS H. SPENCE  
Commissioner

Spring 2004

## Family representative position comes to DSS

**"O**ne of the most important components of the Department of Social Services reorganization is increasing family involvement. In order to best promote the welfare of and protect children, we must include family voices at all levels of our organization. The job of Family Representative was recently created to assist Central Office and those in the field to recruit, support and retain parents for a variety of roles. I am thankful that the Casey Foundation provided us with funds for this mission and that we have found such an excellent advocate as Manuela DaCosta to spearhead this initiative." So said Commissioner Harry Spence about how crucial parents will be to the Department's goal of promoting family centered practice.

Manuela DaCosta grew up in the Azores, a group of small islands off the coast of Portugal. Family support was an age-old way of life on her island. She recalls, "Everyone was interdependent. It was the only way we could live with dignity." Though the islanders were monetarily poor, the social aspect of life was very rich. "In an island of six hundred, what happened to one happened to all of us." People took care of each other as a matter of course. "Each year we would fatten two pigs for Christmas, one for ourselves and another to share with other villagers." On Manuela's island there were no services per se, but resources were available to all and coordinated by a Steering Committee elected by the whole village. Villagers cared for the elderly who, in turn, helped with childcare. "Family support was not a concept or a philosophy for us, it was just the way we lived."

At nineteen, Manuela left her island and the education she was pursuing to come to the United States with her family. She found herself living within a small Portuguese community, working in a shoe factory and totally isolated from the mainstream culture.



Years later, Manuela described the immigration experience this way. "You have to have permeable boundaries. You have to be able to remember the past (because it will never leave you) and understand the new. Most importantly, you have to find within yourself a place for the past and the present to peacefully co-exist."

She began taking one college course at a time as she worked at factory jobs and in a hospital kitchen. Even when married with two children and holding part-time jobs, she continued to take courses – graduating from college the same year as her youngest daughter. Beginning in the late 80s, Manuela became a community organizer for WIC, a group care worker, and then a DSS family support specialist for the southeast region. She also has been a foster parent to a teenage girl.

According to Assistant Commissioner Pamela Whitney, "Manuela combines professionalism with passion and charm in a way that gets things done. Not because she does it all herself, but because people want to join her in forwarding the family support mission."

Manuela says, "There are few who are against family support principles, but many who think it will not work. I know it works – I've lived it." As DSS moves forward in implementing new Core Practice Values, Manuela is charged with assisting Central, Regional and Area offices in promoting parent involvement in the planning, delivery and evaluation of services.

For Manuela, "The experience of being an immigrant is similar to creating social change. It requires that you respect the past, accept the present and work together to make a healthy transition to a new way." If you are a parent who wants to be involved in helping DSS become more family centered and strength based, call Manuela at 617-748-2454.

**Building Partnerships to Prevent Child Abuse – Community by Community!**

Community Connections is funded by the Massachusetts Department of Social Services



# You can change a future ...

## Northern Berkshire Coalition helps DSS

For the past 5 years, the Northern Berkshire Community Coalition (NBCC), which includes the towns of Clarksburg, Williamstown, North Adams, and Florida, has been working to make kids safer. NBCC and the Massachusetts

Department of Social Services (DSS) have combined forces to support existing foster and adoptive homes and to increase the number of local foster and adoptive homes.

According to Al Bashevkin, Executive Director of NBCC, "We distribute flyers to schools, churches and other locations throughout the community to increase public awareness.

Coalition members help in the effort." In addition, targeted public messages are communicated in local newspapers, the NBCC monthly newsletter, and Internet community information resources. Informational sessions are held in libraries and other local venues. NBCC makes presentations to community groups, and DSS employees staff booths at public events.

When the US Post Office released a national Adoption Stamp, NBCC partnered with the local post office in organizing a ceremony to recognize local adoptive parents. "It was an innovative way of recognizing those individuals who serve as adoptive parents, and the public recognition also serves as a means of recruiting others," says Kathy Keeser, NBCC Program Director.

The NBCC understands that beyond recruitment is the need for supporting foster and adoptive parents. Monthly forums, held at a local church, have an average attendance of about 65.

The forums allow educators, the community at large and foster and adoptive parents to discuss how, together, they can best help kids. A survey of social service professionals gathers ideas on how to recruit more foster and adoptive homes. The Northern Berkshire Clergy Association works with NBCC each spring to hold six weeks of public informational sessions, distribute recruitment bulletins, and hold services for foster and adoptive families.

In the most hands-on project, kids can come to a special resource

room at DSS to pick out toys, clothes, backpacks and other fun and needed items provided by the community. Pat Pumbo, DSS Family Resource Supervisor says, "this is a project that I hope will continue as part of our on-going partnership with NBCC. It helps so many children and youth coming into foster care." The sustained efforts of the NBCC over the past five years have played a crucial roll in helping DSS to increase: the community-wide awareness of the importance of foster care in the lives of so many children and youth; the number of families who have become foster parents in North Berkshire; and the support given to foster families from the community.



**"We try to let potential foster parents know how much they are needed."**

— Al Bashevkin



**Keep us informed!**

Send us your:  
Story ideas

Comments or questions  
announcements, events,  
or special projects

### Community Connections

24 Farnsworth Street  
Boston, MA 02210  
Attention: Jan Elia  
or fax it to  
(617) 748-2441

### BOSTON

- Chelsea Community Connections  
(617) 889-7100
- Dorchester CARES (617) 474-1256
- Jamaica Plain Coalition: Tree of Life/  
Arbol de Vida (617) 522-4832
- Lower Roxbury Coalition (617) 989-3247
- South Boston FANS (617) 269-9331

### CENTRAL/METRO

- Fitchburg Joint Coalition for Health  
(978) 342-2069
- Framingham Coalition Community  
Connections Action Team (508) 879-6874
- Southbridge Community Connections  
(508) 765-6670
- Worcester Community Connections Coalition  
(508) 754-1176 x126





**In** KEEPING WITH THEIR MISSION to strengthen families and prevent child abuse and neglect, Community Connections coalitions have been working with local DSS area offices, many with the mission of increasing the availability of loving foster homes.

Today, there are a lot of ways to make a positive difference in your community. Right now, one of the greatest ways you can help is to become a foster parent.

There are children in your community, and throughout the Commonwealth, urgently needing a safe place to live. Our state is critically short of loving foster families who can care for children when their own families can't. These children need your help – long-term, short-term, and sometimes even for one night.

When you give children a caring place to live until they can safely return to their own families, you're also providing them with love, patience, understanding – a nurturing life experience that will

make a positive impression on them, one that they'll remember for the rest of their lives.

The Massachusetts Department of Social Services is the state agency mandated to provide social services to children and their families. While maintaining child safety as the paramount concern, the Department uses a community-focused, team approach aimed at strengthening the child's family. Team members include foster parents, birth parents, extended family, community supports and social workers who collaborate to create a Service Plan that will provide the services necessary to help the child achieve a permanent living situation.

For more information or to find out what you can do, please pick up the phone and call 1-800-KIDS-508 or visit our web site at [www.dsskids.org](http://www.dsskids.org).

Change the future of a child in your community – become a foster parent or a support to foster families!

#### NORTHEAST

- Lawrence/Methuen Community Coalition  
(978) 975-8793
- Lowell Alliance for Families & Neighborhoods  
(978) 454-5405, x122
- Lynn Community Connections Coalition  
(781) 477-2902



#### SOUTHEAST

- Brockton Neighbors United  
(508) 588-5099
- Cape Cod Neighborhood Support Coalition  
(508) 539-2711
- New Bedford Community Connections Coalition (508) 994-9625 x21
- United Neighbors of Fall River  
(508) 675-9281, x107



# One child at a time

## Helping children trust again

According to Commissioner Harry Spence, the role of DSS is to help communities ensure the welfare and safety of their children. For the past eight years Community Connections staff have been an important link between DSS and the community. For Bethel Vazquez, former Family Advocate for the Lowell Alliance for Families and Neighborhoods, making that link became a more personal mission.

Bethel had worked at Centro America in Lawrence for five years conducting supervised visits with parents who had become involved with DSS. Her work showed her first hand the critical need for Hispanic foster parents, and she resolved to do something about it. When she left that job in 1997 she took up the crucial work of foster parenting.

"I applied for MAPP Training, and got two children right away," said Bethel. The children, 6 months and 2 years old, were soon taken in by a family member. "It felt very good for me to see that they were going to remain in their own family," said Bethel. "I think that is for the best." Not long after, a brother and sister were placed with Bethel. Again, their maternal

grandmother asked for them after a short time. "This was good," said Bethel "and because they were with me such a short time, it was not hard for me to let go. They were going to a safe place."



**Bethel Vazquez and daughter Chilesabeth, happy together after the adoption**

"My next baby was 3 years old, and I adopted her January 15, 2003," said Bethel. "At times, I had mixed feelings about the adoption and my role as a foster parent. The fact that children came to me because they were in harm's way made me very sad.

However, I am happy to provide a safe place for children who can't protect themselves and who need a safe place to live and be cared for." Bethel says that when she first

became a foster parent her goal was not to take the place of a mother, but to be a foster parent who could make the children feel like they had a friend, and someone they could trust.

Bethel believes very strongly that "DSS kids need foster parents who will provide comfort and help them to trust again."

DSS depends on the dedication and commitment of Bethel, and other foster and adoptive parents like her.

## Family Support Specialists can provide help and info about Community Connections

To find out more about Community Connections, check out the Community Connections web site [www.dsskids.org](http://www.dsskids.org), or call your local Family Support Specialist:

- Brockton, Cape Cod, Fall River, New Bedford  
• **Manuela DaCosta** (508) 894-3959
- Holyoke, Montague, North Adams, North Quabbin, Southwick, Springfield  
• **Mary Kenney** (413) 452-3435
- Dorchester Patch, Lawrence/Methuen, Lowell, Lynn, Roxbury  
• **Danny Lewis** (978) 557-2717
- Fitchburg, Framingham, Southbridge, Worcester  
• **Carl McCarthy** (508) 929-2153
- Chelsea, Dorchester, Jamaica Plain, South Boston  
• **Danny Lewis** (617) 574-8412
- Family Support Team Leader  
• **Brian Cummings** (617) 748-2336
- Family Policy Analyst  
• **Joan Stiles** (617) 748-2355
- Assistant Commissioner  
• **Pamela Whitney** (617) 748-2338

### WESTERN

- Brick House Community Resource Center (413) 863-9576
- Enlace de Familias de Holyoke (413) 532-9300
- North Quabbin Community Coalition (978) 249-3703
- Northern Berkshire Community Coalition (413) 663-7588
- Southwick Family Support Coalition (413) 569-3456
- Springfield Family Support Coalition (413) 733-7699
- Valuing Our Children Program, Athol (978) 249-8467







# You can change a future, one child at a time

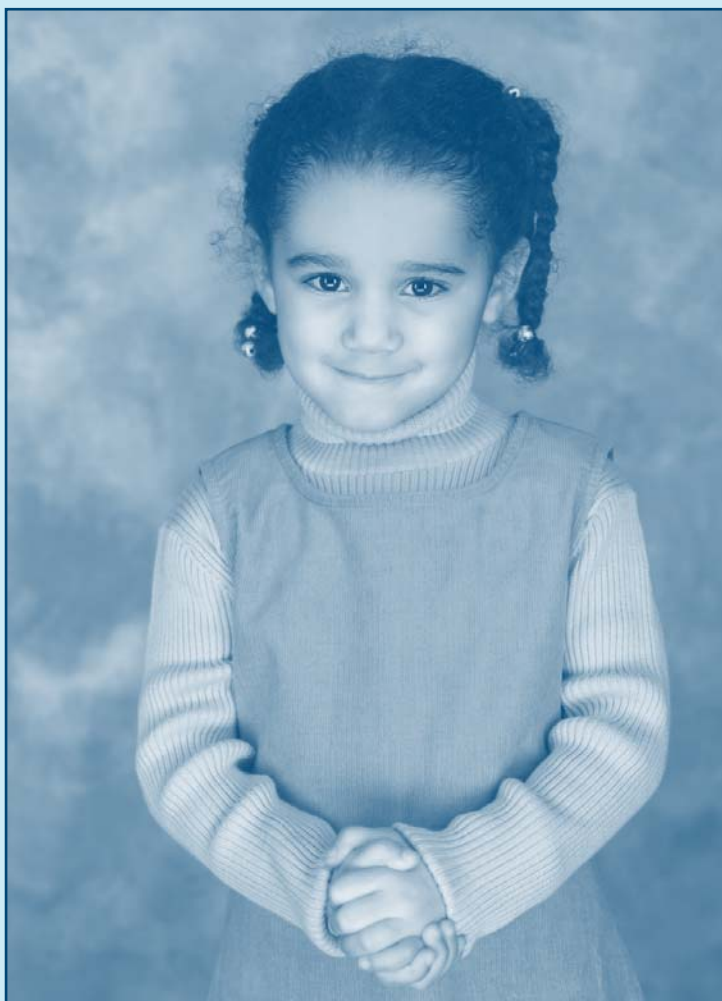
## Ayúdenos a cambiar el futuro, ayude a un niño

Throughout our Commonwealth, there are currently thousands of children in state care in need of a family. Bringing a child into your home through the Massachusetts Department of Social Services is more than a short-term solution. Becoming a foster or adoptive parent will forever change a child's life as well as your own.

Através de todo nuestro estado, hay miles de niños que necesitan el cuidado de una familia. Trayendo a un niño a su hogar a través del Departamento de Servicios Sociales de Massachusetts, es mucho más que una solución a corto plazo. Llegando a ser un padre adoptivo, cambiará para siempre la vida de un niño y a sí mismo la suya.

Find out today about **foster** or **adoptive** parenting.

Para más información acerca de **padres adoptivos** llame al.



## Caring for kids | Cuidando a los niños

Massachusetts Department of Social Services  
Departamento de Servicios Sociales de Massachusetts  
1-800-KIDS-508 • DSS Web Site: [www.dsskids.org](http://www.dsskids.org)



# FOSTER CARE:

## More ways you can help

### Support kids directly

- Support a child's activity, such as offering a scholarship for a child to attend summer camp.
- Donate blankets, homemade afghans, travel bags and other items that may become a child's special possession during a difficult time.
- Make a tax-deductible donation of money or materials to the DSS Kids Fund, providing foster children with clothing, toys, books, holiday gifts, special activities and necessities.

### Support foster families

- Ask foster parents if there are ways you can help.
- Offer to provide special activities for the children.
- Participate in special event functions for children and their foster families.

### Recruit foster families

- Educate your organization about the need for short-term and long-term foster homes.
- Encourage members of your organization to become involved in DSS programs – as little as one volunteer hour per week can have a positive impact on the lives of children.
- Sponsor a neighborhood get-together where prospective foster parents can get together with social workers and learn more about DSS.

## Become a foster parent yourself!

For more information please call:  
1-800-kids-508 or visit  
[www.dsskids.org](http://www.dsskids.org)



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**QUARTERLY**



Massachusetts  
Department of  
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Commissioner

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